Jewish Tribune – Bo

**The Smell Test**

The Sefer Hachinuch is a classic. Written in 13th century Spain, as a bar mitzva present for his son, the author, who anonymously calls himself a “Levi from the city of Barcelona”, sets out details of all 613 mitzvos and suggests reasons for each of them.

There are twenty mitzvos in this week’s sedrah and most relate to the korban pesach. This includes mitzva number sixteen, the mitzva not to break the bones of the korban pesach and it is perhaps this mitzva that is the most famous in the entire Sefer Hachinuch.

The Chinuch coins the phrase: **אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו**, a man is fashioned according to his actions. In other words, how you act is what you become. If a person acts regally and eats the korban pesach without breaking the bones in a ravenous fashion, he becomes princely. That is why, suggests the Chinuch, the Torah prohibits breaking the bones of the korban pesach; it is the first step to move the Jewish people away from a race of slaves to a nation of princes. And it is true for all generations.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky tells of the time he was in the Philadelphia Yeshiva, more than 50 years ago. One afternoon during high school classes, the fire alarm suddenly went off. All the high school students and teachers left the building safely.

A test that was supposed to be given the next day remained on the teacher’s desk – at least for the first few minutes of the alarm. It seems that a copy of the test disappeared during the ensuing tumult.

The *roshei yeshiva* were not amused. Rabbi Kamenetsky did not remember if anyone was caught or what the consequences doled to the individual were, but he did remember that the entire *mesivta* was called for an unprecedented assembly and a strong *shmuess* from the *roshei* *yeshiva*.

The *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Elya Svei, who never, ever, addressed the high school exclusively, spoke with such clarity and intensity that his words still reverberate within Rabbi Kamenetsky.

The rosh yeshiva quoted the above *Sefer Hachinuch*. **אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו***,*a man is crafted and becomes who he is by the actions he performs. All his thoughts always follow the actions that he does, whether good or bad.

The *rosh yeshiva* went through the *Sefer Hachinuch*, who explains that a sinner can change by channeling his efforts and actions in performing Torah and *mitzvos*, even if not totally for the sake of Heaven. If he does so, he immediately inclines towards the good.

If a person acts regally and eats without breaking bones in a crass manner, he becomes princely. It is not honourable for the sons of kings to eat in a degrading and ravenous manner. For free men, those who have transformed to the Chosen Nation, it is not a proper thing to do.

Then the *rosh yeshiva* explained the flip side and focused on the issue at hand. Even if a man is perfectly righteous and his heart is straight and innocent, if he acts in a duplicitous manner and cheats, he will ultimately become a perennial cheater.

The *rosh yeshiva* went on to talk about the fact that it is impossible to split the persona and say, “I only cheat on tests. I only cheat on taxes.” One cannot selectively choose what he lies about, claiming that he is able to control his honesty in other areas. There is no such thing as, “I lied about this, but I won’t lie about that.” A liar is a liar because he lies.

Rav Henoch Lebowitz used to call it the smell test. If something does not smell right, keep away.

Rabbi Kamenetsky goes on to tell a story in which the governor of New York called Yeshivas Chafetz Chaim in Kew Garden Hills, looking for the *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Henoch Leibowitz. After the governor was informed that the *rosh yeshiva* had already passed away, he sighed, stating that he was one of the most ethical people he knew, and he wanted his advice on a certain piece of legislation to determine if it was honest or not.

In the 1980s, New York State government gave a grant for $75,000 to the *yeshiva* to install energy-efficient lighting. Through the efforts of scrutinous bidding and cost-saving that the *yeshiva* was always inclined to perform, the final bill came out to only $60,000. The *rosh yeshiva* spared no effort to return the extra $15,000 to the government.

Because of the unprecedented gesture, there was no vehicle in which to return legitimately granted money. The *rosh yeshiva* refused to keep the extra monies, but the pencil pushers in Albany had no idea what to do. The clerk promised to call him back, but when he spoke to the *rosh yeshiva* again, he had nothing further to report. “I checked again,” he said, “and there is no way for us to take this money back. Please, just keep it for your school.”

But Rav Henoch would not be dissuaded. “I am going to write a check to your office and send it back to you,” he informed the clerk. “I cannot keep money that isn’t rightfully mine.”

The clerk who heard the *rosh yeshiva*’s adamancy to return money that was not his was a fellow named David Patterson, who eventually became the governor. The impact of Rav Henoch’s integrity remained with him and prompted him, years later, to call about the ethicality of the impending legislation.

As Rabbi Kamenetsky concludes, I came to realise that if one begins by failing the smell test, eventually things will stink.

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